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Civic education partnerships: Civil society organisations, donors and the state in Fiji

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This article reflects on some of the challenges and opportunities presented when working in partnership in the highly politicised and contested Fijian Civil Society environment over the past five years. The authors are practitioners who specialise in working with communities which experience conflict. The paper discusses and analyses the genesis and growth of a series of partnerships between and within civil society organisations in Fiji, a peacebuilding organisation in Australia, and a number of bilateral and multilateral donors. Recognising the importance of building multi stakeholder partnerships in order to advance processes of peacebuilding and development, we investigate how Civil Society Organisations are negotiating the ever-changing political landscape.

[Keywords: Partnerships, Fiji, Civil Society, Peacebuilding, Dialogue]

Introduction

In this article we document and examine a CSO generated dialogic process of engagement with community leaders and a military led government. Our experiences demonstrate that Civil Society Organisations (CSO) can create meaningful partnerships with donors and international organisations that allow for advocacy, dialogue and progress towards a more democratic and inclusive Fiji. The first part of the paper explores the current political and socio-economic climate in Fiji and analyses the effects of numerous coups upon CSO cohesion and activity. With reference to the relevant literature we then review the need for strategic partnerships that are designed to deal with complex conflicts, and in light of this discuss our experiences of building a strategic partnership network and dialogue process. The paper demonstrates how collaborative approaches using dialogues or exploratory learning conversations have opened up new creative, integrated approaches, built connections across stakeholders, produced better working team relationships and leveraged synergies that build on each organisations' strengths. Sitting down together to listen to and come to better know one another's perspectives and stories are important first steps to building partnerships and enable transitions to peace and democracy. The paper ends with

some reflection on the essential elements required to make partnerships successful.

Our paper reflects upon a three year process of dialogue in which the authors were both the designers and facilitators of the dialogue process and events. During this process we held multi-party consultations with civil society and the military led government about what a dialogue event should entail. We also conducted a qualitative survey around CSOs' perceptions of inter and intra organisational collaboration, and CSO interaction with communities¹. The paper documents the emerging outcomes and lessons we have learned whilst facilitating these processes. The processes are ongoing and thus we shy away from hard and fast research findings that can be trialled against other comparative literature.

The Changing Political, Social and Economic Landscape in Fiji: The situation facing Civil Society Organisations

Fiji gained independence in 1970 yet has suffered four coups in 20 years. These destabilising events have resulted in long-lasting political upheaval, the erosion of public confidence and the independence of key institutions. Long lasting tensions between the indigenous Fijian population and the Indian communities transported by the British in the late 1800s as indentured labour, have resulted in competition over land, access to resources, and a perception of discrimination from both sides. The electoral system has to date privileged the indigenous population and the most recent coup in 2006 was prompted by a military-stated objective to address the ethnic tension in the country and to reconfigure the electoral system. Unfortunately the 2006 military coup saw the start of a gradual slide towards social and political repression in Fiji. This slide accelerated after the April 2009 abrogation of Fiji's constitution with the Bainimarama government, primarily through the use of emergency legislation, largely silencing and/or suppressing all opposition. The government has been particularly successful in smothering and virtually dismantling political parties and political leaders to the point that the current political environment lacks any real debate, with a pervasive political culture of apathy, confusion and division. Public Emergency Regulations (PER) now prohibit public assembly, restrict media freedom, and confer extensive power to the military and police.

In addition to long standing ethnic and social divisions within society in Fiji, which in turn manifest within the relationships and foci of many CSOs, there are a number of additional factors which impact the peace and conflict dynamic. These include:

¹ Our survey was consistent with the findings of the 2007 Civicus report which documented the CSO landscape in Fiji at that time.

- **Urban migration:** The increased drift from rural to urban and peril-urban areas² has resulted in increased stress on urban infrastructure and services including health centres, schools, power and safe water supply to name a few. Squatter settlements and high unemployment present potential flashpoints as does the fact that these new communities lack cohesion in a context where governance and conflict resolution mechanisms have been weakened.
- **Use of force as a means of conflict resolution** as exhibited in the numerous coups, sets an unfortunate precedent for dispute resolution and a parallel desensitisation of communities to the impact of violence. This desensitisation to violence is increasingly linked to issues of domestic violence and a readiness to resort to violent means of conflict resolution within families and communities.
- **Ethnic polarisation.** Legislation, policy and practices as currently constituted reinforce and encourage ethnic polarisation and discrimination. In addition to inequalities and structural divisions in areas such as land legislation³, other social and cultural practices have tended to reinforce separation and division.

A Snapshot of Fijian Civil Society

The people of Fiji have a long history of social concern, volunteerism and community action, traditionally through religious and ethnically based cultural groupings, which serviced communities largely separated by ethnic or religious differences. This has limited CSO capacity to bridge socio-cultural and socio-economic divisions. CSOs have tended to come together in loose coalitions over common interests, while others have coalesced into more formal associations under umbrella bodies of varying strengths and membership support⁴.

Large membership organisations including Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and trade unions have the capacity to generate income and appear to be sufficiently resourced to deliver their programmes and services, while others rely on public and private fundraising and compete for funding from international aid and donor agencies, and corporate foundations. CSO activity in Fiji is highly centralised. Not only is Suva the key focal point for civil society dialogue and engagement with each other and donors, the accessible and more densely populated cities and transport corridors are the primary focal point for most of their activities.

² e.g. the Suva-Nausori and Nadi-Lautoka corridors

³ For example the expiration of agricultural land leases developed under the Agricultural Land and Tenants Act (ALTA) further exacerbates social and economic tensions and has created social polarisation between Fijian and Indo-Fijian communities (PSDA 2006).

⁴ Umbrella bodies include co-coordinating organisations of women, of trade unions, of youth, of human rights advocates, of people with disabilities, of churches, of religious bodies, and of social welfare providers.

The shifting political context has in turn impacted the CSO sector, the focus of CSOs and the way they work. The major CSOs in Fiji, including the influential FBOs, were united in their determination to end all coups. The means to this end however, has deeply divided them. Some welcomed the interim government's call, soon after they took control of government in 2006, to formulate a People's Charter for a Better Fiji. They hoped that by participating in the process they could influence not only the design of an improved democratic system through which the people of Fiji could contribute more meaningfully to the governance of their country, but also to ensure there would be no more coups. Some have withdrawn their support in disappointment. Others continue to be engaged. Some have resolutely remained outside the process. With the passage of time, understanding for some positions has developed, but differences remain.⁵ Interview undertaken by the authors, and personal knowledge of the CSO environment, attest to disrupted relationships and mistrust and divisiveness which all CSOs acknowledge and are attempting to address⁶.

The issue of collaboration poses some challenges in the context of current limitations presented by the Public Emergency Regulations (PER) in relation to public meetings which affect the capacity to pull organisations together for information sharing, dialogue and interagency planning in some cases. In response to the coups, many CSOs have increased their efforts to educate the populace on issues of governance, conflict resolution and leadership. It has become obvious that facilitation skills for these civic education services, particularly for conflict resolution and for mediation training, are critical steps in the process. More mainstream CSOs have developed specific programmes for youth with the long-term goal of contributing to a more enlightened future leadership and population of Fiji.

A New Peacebuilding Partnership Approach to Civic Education

There is a growing realization of the need and value of adopting a more collaborative approach that includes developing ongoing strategic partnerships across donor partners, governments, International Non Government Organisations (INGOs) and local CSOs. The Irish aid agency Trocaire's research report for INGOs for example, argues for a critical rethink on how to respond to the challenges of the 21st century. Trocaire and other agencies emphasize the need for more collaboration across development stakeholders (Lavergne & Wood, 2009; Trocaire Report, 2011).

This change in thinking was influenced by the watershed experiences of the 2004 Aceh Tsunami and 2010 Haiti earthquake. The key lesson was that humanitarian, disaster and recovery responses needed a more collaborative approach across

⁵ AusAID, *Survey of Fijian Civil Society Organisations*, unpublished report.

⁶ At a recent meeting for CSOs facilitated by two of the authors, all remarked upon the atmosphere of distrust which they wished to overcome. See Spence and O'Loughlin, Discussion on NGOCHR workshop, Unpublished report, March 2011.

donor organisations that included and relied on partnerships with local CSOs. A collaborative approach to disaster response, was seen as enabling a better shared understanding of the real needs of communities and to discovering local solutions to the logistical realities of managing supply chains to deliver aid (Holguín-Veras & Wachtendorf, 2011; Oxfam International Report, 2009). Across the globe, strategic partnerships are now seen as a way to enable more effective, efficient service delivery and meet the emerging needs of communities. The global multi stakeholder Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness program endorses the following guiding principles for North-South partnership relationships:

- A shared vision, negotiated in a context of mutual support and solidarity, beyond specific programmes or projects.
- A respect for diversity that also clearly identifies shared roles and objectives, while negotiating differences arising from respective organisational mandates and the autonomy of each counterpart.
- Respect and honesty in working relationships, based on a continued commitment to understand and appreciate each other's potential and limits (OECD, 2010).
- Transparency, with a clear commitment to work in ways that maximise accountability to each other for the commitments and obligations undertaken together (financial and otherwise).
- A climate of mutual trust that is the result of both striving for equity in the practice of the relationship and the commitment of time, through multiple forms of engagement with each other.
- A sharing of knowledge that is built on a commitment to devote human and financial resources to appropriate forms of mutual learning.

Emerging Partnerships

Two examples of this new multi-stakeholder partnership approach in Fiji are outlined in this paper. These collaborative, partnership building dialogic approaches have been used across Fijian stakeholders and communities to change perceptions, build trust, enable shared understanding of the complexity of problems as the first step to resolving long standing conflicts.

The first is the strategic partnership network built by the Pacific Centre for Peacebuilding (PCP), a local non government organization that focuses on peacebuilding and conflict transformation work in Fiji and the Pacific, and Peaceworks Pty. Ltd. (Peaceworks), a peacebuilding learning organization based in Australia. As well as PCP and Peaceworks, the network includes key civil society leaders, community leaders and donors in order to facilitate discussion around dialogue and transitions to democracy. The second is an emerging partnership across civil society organisations in Fiji which serves the purpose of preparing citizens for elections in 2014.

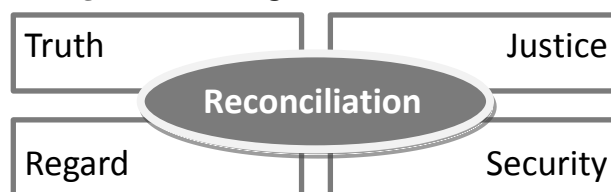
PCP and Peaceworks have established a five-year partnership built around common strategic goals of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The organisations have collaborated in designing and facilitating trainings and workshops on these issues across the Pacific and the United States. Both organisations specialize in dealing with difficult customers; that is, rather than eschewing engagement with military and paramilitary organisations, they actively seek to dialogue and interact with individuals and groups within these organisations in order to share perspectives, foster understandings and work out solutions to conflict.

In recognition of this particular approach to engagement, a prominent women's organisation through its Transitional Justice program approached Peaceworks and PCP to design and facilitate a multi-stakeholder civic education process. The organisation wished to host a series of dialogues to bring together representatives of government, civil society, security forces, churches, ethnic communities, women, youth, political parties, private sector and business communities to build and rebuild trust and relationships harmed by previous political upheavals and instability rooted in historical political tensions and indifference. Funding for these dialogues had been sourced from a range of donors⁷. This multi-donor funding arrangement allowed for emergent partnerships between donors and the organisations involved in designing and facilitating the process. The objective of the dialogue events was to create opportunities for participants from all strata of Fijian society to increase their regard for each other and to share perspectives on how to move the Fijian conflict forward.

The proposed civic education process was conceptualised as a series of dialogue events and was designed to complement the work of other civic education processes such as those being undertaken by the UNDP, and other Civil Society Organisations.

Kriesberg's dimensions of reconciliation model offers some fresh perspectives on ways in which dialogue initiatives might be used as a conflict mediating, relationship building and peace promoting tool (See Figure 1). He defines the concept of reconciliation as those actions or initiatives that help transform a destructive conflict or relationship and views mutual recognition or *regard* and the sharing of perspectives or *truth* getting as central to any reconciliation process (Kriesberg, 2004).

Figure 1. Kriesberg's model of reconciliation



⁷ Donors funding dialogue initiatives at present include the UN, AusAID, NZAID, Conciliation Resources, Oxfam NZ and the EU.

We argue that two distinct approaches to peace building in conflict-affected states can be identified: institutional and relational. The former focuses primarily on the (re)building of institutional infrastructure and capacity, the holding of elections, the (re)vitalization of the economy, and the creation and installation of a functioning governance structure. The latter (often named as reconciliation) focuses upon creating or repairing the social relationships that form the glue that holds society together. Activities that support and promote the rebuilding of trust and relationships at community level will maximize the effectiveness of the endeavour. Relational approaches are all necessary components of any peacebuilding process and these are facilitated primarily through fostering dialogue between former parties to the conflict.

The dialogue design process, which we designed and facilitated, initially took place over a number of weeks and continues to be modified according to participant's needs. It is based upon Kriesberg's model of building regard and trust and the first stage of the trust building process is the scoping visit. The following paragraphs describe the dialogue design process.

The Scoping Visit

The Scoping Visit is the very first stage of the dialogue process that takes place in each division⁸ prior to the preparation and the execution of the dialogue proper. It is conducted to raise awareness about dialogue, gather support and advice from the division, invite participation and explore possible safe spaces as venues for the dialogue process proper. Prior to the scoping visits, contacts are made in each division using existing networks. For transparency and ownership purposes, contacts and visits are also made to the divisional Commissioners⁹ to facilitate government departments' participation in the divisional dialogue processes. The scoping visits are either done in focus groups or individual meetings. Registration forms are distributed during the scoping visits and dates are set as deadline for submission of all registrations.

The preparatory stage

During the Preparatory Stage, continuous meetings are held between the organisation responsible for hosting the dialogue and the facilitators in order to assess the outcomes of the scoping visits, decide on a programme design, screen and select participants, decide on venue, and discuss and finalize other logistical arrangements. In deciding the venue, the following four factors were considered as enabling effective dialogue to take place: (1) the provision of ample spaces for movement of participants as the process is very participatory and active; (2) isolated locations away from disturbances and distractions; (3) the availability of

⁸ There are four divisions in Fiji: East, West, North and Central.

⁹ A divisional Commissioner is the chief representative of Government in the Administrative Division. S/He authorizes and plays a more prominent role in directing and coordinating development in the various divisions by working with Divisional Boards consisting of members of the public from the respective divisions.

the necessary facilities for a 'live in experience'; and (4) an environment helpful for self reflection and healing for the participants in a dialogue process.

In order to ensure the emergence of multi-level, multi-stakeholder partnerships, participant selection is based on the ability to influence change in their sectors and the need to ensure a balance in gender, ethnicity, municipal representations, religious affiliations, and age differences. Regular communication takes place between hosts and selected participants to confirm participation, clarify and confirm transportation needs and prepare participants for the process.

The dialogue process

The overall purpose of the Dialogue Process is to establish a multi-stakeholder dialogue community, which can openly discuss and share perceptions and ideas about how to move towards democracy. The process is modelled as much as is appropriate and possible upon the indigenous Fijian methods of *Talanoa*, or sense and conversation making and sharing. Community dialogue guidelines are established to ensure participation from all is respected and maximised, learning for everyone happens, disruptive behaviour is minimised, and safety in the dialogue space is guaranteed. The community first focuses on sharing perspectives and experiences on 'Dialogue' as a concept to encourage a common understanding of a dialogue process, what is contained within, the possibilities arising from it, and to affirm and share key points about the theories of dialogue.

This is then supplemented by a deeper active exercise on what has occurred over the past thirty years in Fiji. This exercise, called the history walk, allows the community to share their experiences of living through the coups, and the resultant individual political, economic and social consequences. This exercise has proved very effective in building regard and trust by disrupting stereotypes, uncovering divergent and shared perspectives, and reaching a common understanding of the multiple effects of political instability. The rest of the dialogue process focuses on the 'Way Forward' with a series of exercises designed to get participants thinking about potential partnership collaborations and activities. Participants divide into their district groups to design a practical action plan for a chosen key theme for action related to their local critical issues. Some of the key themes for action resulting from each dialogue process include sustained dialogue on land issues, health, environment and women's issues, improved networking for collaboration on peace and development, and information sharing.

The dialogue process ends on day three with a closing ritual that evaluates the effectiveness of the process and brings the formal dialogue to a close. The 'Circle Process' is a traditional Pacific dialogue and mediation tool, and has been adopted as a key part of these dialogue events. It is used to encourage individual contributions and comments to the effectiveness of the process and expressing hopes for next steps and follow on activities.

The National Dialogue Conference

The National Dialogue Conference is a culmination of a round of divisional dialogue processes that brings together divisional dialogue participants and senior government representatives. The aim is to share and deepen understanding of dialogue and dialogue processes, and provide a space to dialogue, engage, and build relationships with key national government representatives on issues at the district, divisional and national level. This is a three day process that follows a similar format as the divisional dialogue processes. It emphasises the building of collaborative approaches on key issues at the divisional and national level and on how using a dialogue approach can promote peace and development at different levels. The process identifies existing approaches, gaps, challenges and opportunities, and capacities for peace and development. Also identified are alternative strategic and collaborative dialogue approaches that ensure sustainability, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and participation and address key divisional and national issues between civil society and government.

Emerging Outcomes

The strategic dialogue processes outlined above have led to some significant collaborations and partnerships at a number of levels. The experiences of these strategic dialogue processes have provided alternative inclusive and participatory approaches to dealing with issues and led to some encouraging results.

At the national level there has been successful development of enduring multi-level, multi-stakeholder partnerships that act on common issues of concern. For instance, during the first National Dialogue Conference in 2010, A government ministry (Ministry of Land), a civil society organization, and some land owners and tenants from the West and Northern Divisions strategised on further dialogue processes to deal with the current land issues relating to ownership and utilisation. Since then, two divisional land ownership and utilisation dialogues have been conducted in the North and the West. A spin off activity has resulted from the Northern Land dialogue where some indigenous land owners and tenants have joined a small group to continue to dialogue on ways forward and sustainable solutions to land conflicts.

District groups have collaborated effectively to reach agreements on strategies for overcoming challenges and focusing on how best all can contribute to the development of their community and nation. During the first Dialogue process for the Northern Division in 2010, the 23 members including the Commissioner formed themselves into a taskforce to dialogue on strategies to address the alarming rate of child abuse in the North and to provide a shelter for abused children. They have had a few meetings to date and are now working together to raise public awareness about the issue. They are also fundraising for the establishment of a shelter where abused children can be helped and healed from the traumatic experiences they have been through.

Government and civil society representatives have been able to experience a dialogue process that promotes inclusiveness and participation from all

significant stakeholders. This has also led to a deepened understanding of the principles, values, goals and expected behaviours of dialogue as a non violent peacebuilding approach for dealing with issues in the work places of many who attend the dialogue processes. For instance, the Director for Training and Rehabilitation in the Fiji Corrections Services saw the value of the way forward exercise as a dialogue tool and therefore tried it out in their Strategic Planning process some weeks after the dialogue training. The Ministry of Environment representative at a dialogue process experienced the ‘circle process’ as a powerful tool for dialogue and used it in one of their staff meetings. Positive feedback from both participants indicated the effectiveness of these dialogue tools when used appropriately.

Improved relationships between civil society and government are a notable achievement. One example of this was evident at an April, 2011 UNDP-led roundtable involving permanent secretaries from key government ministries and key civil society leaders. Because a good number of participants from both government and civil society had previously attended the strategic dialogue processes together they had already established good working relationships. This was very obvious during the roundtable as there was a marked difference in participation between those who had experienced the strategic dialogue processes and those who had not. Even though trust was still an issue during the roundtable, the fact that some participants in the room had the capacity to use dialogue skills and approaches learnt at the strategic dialogue processes to deal with difficult issues, provided the breakthrough at the roundtable. The difference this made was that even though they were people associated with the two opposing sides, they both had the skill to be involved in strategic dialogue and therefore were able to continue the engagement even though they disagreed on certain issues.

There have also been some ‘spin off’ activities initiated by collaborative networks of dialogue participants on land issues, organizational issues, as well as traditional leadership issues as in the example of the outcome of the land dialogue in the northern division.

A final outcome merging from the strategic dialogue process is the continued interest and a growth in funding from key donor partners who recognise the importance of providing monies to facilitate dialogues as a tool for transitioning to democracy. International agencies working in Fiji, have seen the outcomes of these dialogue processes and recognise the potential it can bring to socio-political and economic growth. Therefore they continue to be interested in providing funding for ongoing sustainable dialogue processes towards peace and stability.

Collaborating across the Divide: Civil Society Partnerships

One of the most significant outcomes of the dialogue process described above has been a healing and mending of relationships across and within civil society organisations, especially those relationships which were fractured by the coups and the responses to them. Civil society organisations are now actively collaborating around the delivery of a range of services and are submitting joint funding proposals for spin off dialogue processes around sector specific issues.

Key CSOs have taken the lead in promoting the benefits of collaboration and advocating for a strategic dialogue wherein issues could be surfaced and activities designed to create a network. A specific civil society focused dialogue held recently enabled participants to explore some of the key issues and challenges facing civil society. Special focus was given the first day to developing a safe space and building confidence through concentrating on deepening the understanding of each organisation's mandate, and the strategic focus areas of each of the key stakeholders. This discussion and sharing of perspectives in small groups allowed points of intersection and synergies to emerge. Shared challenges and possible areas of collaboration were also identified. New discoveries about each other and the challenges of working in a rapidly changing political environment were identified and shared. For example, the issue of self-care for those leading organisations was identified as a key priority with participants discussing the challenges of sustaining energy and health and staying safe in such a politically volatile environment.

This trust building process allowed for deeper and more difficult conversations on day two. A reflection exercise focusing upon civil society after a successful transition to democracy and the steps needed to get there realised some significant factors. A consensus emerged that in order to build this future, new behaviours, attitudes and ways of thinking were necessary and that Civil Society representatives were responsible for modelling collaborative, cohesive and strategic leadership. An exercise in scenario planning was used to build group foresight and to think through adaptive planning. The exercise allowed participants to discuss gaps in their current approaches to leading transitions. It was recognised that few CSOs are active in the economic sphere, and consequently there may be an urgent need to engage more proactively with the private sector. The key outcomes from the dialogue included a shift to a more proactive and strategic mindset amongst the participating CSOs where strategic collaborations could be formed to address the upcoming challenges of transition back to democracy. The fragmentation of the past was recognised and replaced by a desire for increased cohesion. There was more clarity about the diverse roles necessary to lead transitions to democracy and a recognition of which organisations and individuals were best placed to play these roles. Agreement was reached on an innovative organisational design based on the formation of a self organising network with core bi-monthly review meetings and self-organising clumping of interested organisations based around issues, themes, capability development and collaborative funding opportunities.

Reflections: Building Partnerships for Dealing with Complex Conflicts in Fiji

It is encouraging to see a new leadership approach emerging in the peacebuilding and collaborative community development sector in Fiji. This approach looks to support local partnered solutions and does not shy away from the complexity of socio-cultural landscapes. It focuses on supporting the emergence of collaborative networks of Civil Society Organisations to enable effective,

efficient service delivery and a stronger more resilient civil society. Leading and supporting successful partnerships and civil society in our view requires the following key foundation elements, which complement the guiding principles endorsed by the OECD and described above.

First, it is necessary to design processes that will cultivate a collaborative, cross-organisational culture that encourage on-going partnerships and shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities; in other words, *a shared vision*. Because these partnerships will not necessarily happen organically they will have to be manufactured.

Secondly, it must be recognised that the development of partnerships will depend on new tools such as facilitating exploratory conversations or dialogues that mimic traditional community decision-making styles. Creating safe places, getting to know each other, listening to each others' stories to build *respect and mutual trust* is the social capital that underpins partnerships and promotes the development of local solutions to complex problems.

Partnerships and collaborative agency and CSO networks benefit from having *accountable and transparent 'charters'* that embed shared core values and key priorities. Provision is needed for CSOs to be organically engaged in on-going dialogues and selected partnered initiatives *in recognition of, and according to their sectoral mandate and expertise*.

The *sustained engagement of key Civil Society leaders* who have reach and influence is absolutely imperative. Furthermore it is important to identify and select those members of society, at whichever level, who are considered to be *influential agents of change*, i.e. those with the capacity to take action to move constituents forward and to advocate for engagement around difficult issues. The sustained engagement and understanding of a range of donors is equally important. Taking the time to educate donors on the rationale behind taking a partnership approach to engagement and democratisation has proved extremely fruitful both economically and socio-culturally. Donors now advocate for multi level stakeholder approaches to democratisation in Fiji and are involved in co-funding and hosting dialogue events.

Finally, we have learnt that in order to promote and build networks, we have to *model collaboration*. This involves the host and facilitating organisations continually supporting each other's endeavours and seeking opportunities for co-funding, recognising and valuing each other's limitations and potential.

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